DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 989 RC 019 162

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TITLE Using Multicultural Education To Enhance the Self Worth of Rural At-Risk Students.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 10p.; In: Montgomery, Diane, Ed. Rural America: Where All Innovations Begin. Conference Proceedings (Savannah, GA, March 11-13, 1993); see RC 019 153.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Cultural Awareness; Educational Strategies; *High Risk Students; *Integrated Curriculum; Language Arts; Models; *Multicultural Education; Rural Education; *Rural Youth; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; *Self Concept; Social Studies; Theories

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of multicultural materials from an integrated social studies and language arts curriculum to enhance the self-worth of rural at-risk students. The premise is that the use of this model will strengthen the positive correlation between self-concept and school achievement, thereby reducing risk factors. Theories of self-concept that support a multicultural approach include those of Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Combs and Snygg. The basic characteristics of at-risk students are outlined, including poor socioeconomic class; residence in small, rural communities; poor family relationships; little or no parental involvement in education; and problems at school. Minority students also must deal with factors unique to their minority status. This paper suggests that the most positive approach to multicultural education is to teach a true common-culture curriculum that includes the contributions of minorities and other cultures, with special attention being paid to cultures of the student population. Suggestions for implementing a cooperative learning approach include allowing for interaction and hands-on activities in group settings, using social studies as the content area and language arts as the vehicle for learning, and recognizing that each culture is an entity and has an intrinsic value of its own. (LP)

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USING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION TO ENHANCE THE SELF WORTH OF RURAL AT-RISK STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, NCATE added as a criterion for pre-service teachers that they be able to competently function in multicultural classrooms. If we as teacher educators are to address this criterion, we must assist our college and university students and their public and private school pupils to value students from culturally diverse backgrounds while learning to appreciate the larger human heritage.

The authors of this paper suggest that one approach to this challenge is to use multicultural materials from an integrated Social Studies and Language Arts curriculum to enhance the self worth of rural at-risk students. The premise is that the use of such a model will strengthen the positive correlation between self concept and school achievement, thus reducing the at-risk factors of these students. The remainder of this paper will describe theoretical and implementation elements of this approach.

SELF CONCEPT THEORY

Interest in the self has been evident in American psychology since the beginning of the twentieth century. Even so, it has been the behavior-oriented psychologists who have dominated American psychology in this century. An understanding of this history is of importance in that psychological theories have always had a strong influence on education in
our country. The authors will very briefly highlight some of the more recent theoretical tenets which support the notions described in this paper.

Carl Rogers (1969) was an eloquent voice, speaking to the self as the central aspect of personality. He, along with Abraham Maslow (1954), wrote about the tendency toward self-actualization and growth when nurtured by the environment. They, with Gordon

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Allport (1955), described all of life as the art of becoming, the movement towards self-actualization.

The writing of Combs and Snygg, in their 1949 book, *Individual Behavior* (2nd ed. 1959), had a major influence upon education as well as psychology. This work is used as the foundation for developing an understanding of the importance of the self, and self concept in the learning process. Since 1960, a large number of research studies into the relationship between the self concept and academic achievement have been conducted. An excellent overview of many of these studies can be found in William Purkey's 1970 book, *Self concept and school achievement.* In reviewing any study of the relationship between self concept and school achievement we should remain alert to Purkey's reminder that:

> Although the data do not provide clear-cut evidence about which comes first - a positive self concept or scholastic success, a negative self concept or scholastic failure - it does stress a strong reciprocal relationship and gives us reason to assume that enhancing the self concept is a vital influence in improving academic performance. (p. 27)

With this background in mind, the question of how we might incorporate multicultural education with the enhancement of self worth presents itself. According to Ramsey et al, (1989), the purposes of the multicultural approach were:

> ...to sensitize all individuals toward ethnic and racial differences, and to increase individual awarenees of cultural traditions and sociological experiences. It was also to help all individuals understand their race and culture, including language and socialization experiences, had value, and could and should exist on a coequal basis with mainstream American values and experiences. (pp. 8,9)

The emphasis is upon the individual, the self. It is therefore possible to use multicultural materials to foster the development of a positive self concept which will, in turn, promote school achievement. Specific techniques and activities for working with teachers in training and for working with pupils in public school classrooms will be described in a later section of this paper.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK RURAL STUDENTS

Regardless of one's race, gender, or culture, there are certain basic factors that are instrumental in producing the highly at-risk class of students. Probably the most common one, and most certainly the one with the greatest far reaching effects, is simply being poor and the resulting socioeconomic class in which one is placed. It is well documented that

low socioeconomic levels are closely related to poor academic achievement (Chall and Curtis, 1991), and, in general, have been fairly good predictors of student achievement (Ornstein and Levine, 1989).

Contrary to widely held beliefs, poverty is not limited to the inner cities nor does it follow racial boundaries. The majority of poor people still live in small towns and rural America (Reed and Saulter, 1990). And typically, rural areas have 30% of the farm population and 24% of the nonfarm population living in poverty (Rodgers and Burge, 1982). Thus the population of rural at-risk students is extremely high, with the majority of unserved and underserved children living in these areas (Helge, 1988). Without question, poverty and low status have affected the achievement of many rural students (DeYoung, 1987).

The home life of the student is another important factor and it is often related to poverty and socioeconomic class. If the family does not have an educational background or does not support education, the student has a greater chance of dropping out (Coleman, 1988.). In general, students with poor or no family relationships and little or no parental involvement in their education are more at-risk (Bull, et al, 1992). Clearly, the more dysfunctional the family becomes, regardless of the cause, the greater the student becomes at-risk.

Problems at school are yet another multi-faceted factor that is characteristic of the at-risk student and often leads to drop-out. Problems such as retention, conflict, failing too many classes, competency tests and the school's lack of tolerance for student diversity in background have been cited by Bull (Bull, et al, 1992). Other studies have found that many of the problems are created by the schools. Grossman (1991) cites numerous examples indicating working class students (lower socioeconomic) receive unfair treatment in school that can create problems for those students. Interestingly, most of the teachers were not aware of their biases.

Students who are members of minority populations have to deal with the above factors as well as ones that are unique to them as minorities. They may look different due to racial or ethnic features and there is evidence that minority students do not perform or behave in the classroom in the same manner as do their Anglo peers (Hale-Benson, 1986). They may have to adjust to cultural values, language, or teaching styles that are totally alien to them, but must continue to function in their own cultures outside school. They must also deal with the problem of prejudice. This may be racial, cultural, social., or economic, and can take many forms, both subtle and overt. It may well take the form of being academically suspect because as a group, minorities will not achieve at the level of their main-stream peers. As a result, they may be labeled low achievers and will not be academically challenged and will fall farther behind and become more at-risk (Ornstein and Levine, 1989).

Thus minorities become low achievers and highly at-risk often as a result of the educational system itself. Yet teachers and administrators are often not aware of what they are doing

to these students and the students' self-esteem, nor are they aware of the rich cultural heritage the students possess.

But one does not have to look different physically in order to receive the same treatment. Since socioeconomic class is a fairly good predictor of achievement in school, then underclass whites as a group are low achievers, too. And they are also minorities. Ornstein and Levine (1989) stated "...their problems are often ignored because they are not well organized as a group and are not deemed newsworthy by the media."

In addressing the highly at-risk multicultural rural population, one must consider the real meaning of multiculture. More often than not, it is thought of in terms of a global world and the exotic differences among cultures, or, more commonly in educational textbooks, as related to minority groups, usually blacks and Hispanics, with only a passing reference to Native Americans and other minorities. Usually it is the poor inner city population that is stressed.

Multiculturalism goes far beyond this. In rural areas there are many minorities that have been overlooked. When one considers not only race and ethnic background, but includes socioeconomic factors, religion, and specific and unique cultures, we become aware of many groups that have not been properly addressed.

Specifically, certain rural populations in the Southeast have not received due recognition, yet educators must deal with them and their unique needs on a daily basis. Far too often these students aren't only highly at-risk academically, but are also highly at-risk as productive members of society.

The multicultural education approach provides the best opportunity to reach a diverse population (Cottrol, 1990). Understanding and appreciating other cultures is the very foundation of multiculture education, yet there is disagreement over how it should be handled. Many believe the goals of the schools should be to teach and preserve the separate identities of the racial and ethnic cultures and not teach a common American culture. Some go so far as to teach contempt for everything white and European (Ravitch, 1991).

Probably the majority of educators believe we should teach our common culture, but include the contributions of other cultures. In a survey done by the New York United Teachers/AFT, eighty-eight per cent believed we should teach a common heritage (1992). Blacks and Hispanics showed the strongest preference with 89% and 87%. Only 70% of the whites supported this position. In the same survey, the participants were asked which was more important, teaching our common heritage, or teaching student ethnicity. Eleven percent favored the distinct ethnic groups, 49% the common heritage, and 40% felt both were equally important. These findings strongly support a balanced curriculum.

The authors of this paper believe the most positive approach to using multicultural education is to teach a true common culture curriculum that includes the contributions of minorities and other cultures, with special attention being paid to those in the student

population. In so doing, an understanding, appreciation, and respect for other cultures becomes a major goal.

Minority students can develop a better understanding of their own culture, take pride in their heritage, and become more positive in their self-esteem. By sharing customs, beliefs, etc., students learn of their likenesses and differences. They also learn of their commonalities and that all cultures are important and many have contributed heavily to our American culture.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MODEL

In using this model teachers may have to change their teaching styles. It calls for more interaction among the students and it is more global than traditional pedagogy. Rural students are global learners who do not seek individual recognition and they do not like individual competition (Potterfield and Pace, 1992). They also like information given to them orally. Clearly they are not at home in the typical urban or urban influenced classroom, so it is imperative that the teachers adapt their teaching styles to the students' needs.

When properly done, the cooperative learning approach is a natural for rural students. It allows for interaction and hands-on activities in a group setting. Work is within the group and it is the group that receives the recognition. Working together for a common goal brings the students together in a different manner than does individual competition,. With a caring teacher and appropriate learning activities, multicultural education can go a long way toward addressing the needs of at-risk rural students. It will also enhance the learning of the other students as well as produce citizens who are aware of the worth of each individual in our society.

There is also a need for an integrated approach to teaching. Content information does not exist in a vacuum. There is correlation between and among information from the various fields of knowledge. If any content information is to become relevant to the student, it must be presented in a manner which will inspire the student to personalize and apply it to his daily life.

Consider, for example, the language arts to be content void, but the primary tools of communication ; reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking, and visioning. From this perspective, social studies becomes the content area and language arts the vehicle for an integrated approach to the teaching and learning processes.

In dealing with specific cultures, the teacher must avoid ethnocentrism and recognize that each culture is an entity that has an intrinsic value of its own.. Understanding this, the teacher can now draw from the various cultures as the basis for a multicultural approach to integrated instruction.

Special attention must be given to the individual cultures of the area. Oftentimes this will include cultures so specific and unique that their problems may not have been addressed outside the immediate area, and the students who are members may well be among the highly at-risk population. The Travelers of Edgefield and Aiken Counties in South Carolina are excellent examples of this phenomenon.

There will be other groups who are also definitely minorities, but who are not thought of as such. These may be large or small groups, almost always white, and possess common factors - socioeconomic class being the most common. Numerous examples exist, but the best known one would be the textile or mill village resident of the southeast. A similar example would be that of the poor, rural isolate.

Rural blacks, while always identified as minorities because they are black, are uniquely different from urban blacks. They need to be dealt with as members of their own culture. And there are different rural black cultures. All are rich and unique in their heritage and they have made major contributions to the overall American culture. Perhaps the most unique culture that falls within this category is that of the Gullahs of the sea islands of South Carolina.

The native American population is also a rural minority. The various cultures represented in the southeast, both reservation and non-reservation, vary greatly from the Indian stereotype portrayed in popular literature, but they share the common denominator in that they are all highly at-risk.

There are also migrant workers who have children attending rural schools. These students may be white, black, or hispanic, and they may be citizens or non-US citizens. They are members of the lowest socioeconomic class and are among the highest at-risk population, but they have much to offer to a multicultural approach to education when their cultures and experiences are shared, respected, and appreciated.

All of the above needs of rural, at-risk students can be addressed through an integrated curriculum model. Unit teaching, incorporating the use of cooperative learning groups, a positive classroom climate based upon the development of trust between teachers and students, and an emphasis upon the unconditional acceptance of each individual and his/her culture are essential elements of the proposed model. . This viable model recognizes the essence and validity of developmental learning. The development of appropriate, functional language skills related to real life, as well as sufficient communication skills to maintain a role as an active participant in the educational processes of the school will empower the student. This empowerment, in turn, is a major contributor to the development of a positive self-concept, enabling the student to combat

the sense of powerlessness which has long been acknowledged as a major cause for dropping out of school.

Within the parameters of this unit teaching model, content materials from both the social studies curriculum and the language arts curriculum will be blended. Children's and adolescent literature will be used as the natural bridge between the two curriculums. Thus the social studies content and the language arts conduit are inextricably merged as the basic component of the model.

CONCLUSIONS

Much has been written about multicultural education in teacher training programs and its implementation in public school classrooms. Nevertheless, we cannot lay claim to successful outcomes in either arena. Peter Scales (1992), has shared some sobering data captured through questionnaires collected from 439 middle grades teachers, deans, and chief state school officers. This study, **Windows of opportunity: Improving middle grades teacher preparation,** was conducted by the Center for Early Adolescence, School of Medicine, located on the Chapel Hill campus of the University of North Carolina. This group of educators reported that they found their teacher preparation had prepared them "inadequately" or "poorly" for several areas in classroom teaching. As in previous studies completed by the center, this sample rated cultural and language diversity as the area in which they were least adequately prepared. They also reported that the knowledge of how to aid young adolescents in managing their social and emotional development and the ability to reflect these characteristics in their teaching were among the least adequately covered aspects of their preparation. This information, gathered on the heels of the many multicultural education models implemented during the 1980's, spotlights the lack of success accruing from these approaches as taught in teacher education programs.

Gezi (1981) summarized the five major approaches to multicultural education as:

1.) Education for the culturally different, with a focus on helping to equalize educational opportunities for such students
2.) Education about cultural differences, with an aim to cultural understanding
3.) Education to preserve cultural pluralism
4.) Education to help children function in two cultures
5.) Education to develop competencies in multiple systems. (p. 5)

Each of these separate models speaks to the individual. Instead of delivering each model separately, these authors suggest that we speak to all of these needs through a unified approach focusing upon the individual, the self. It is the belief of these authors that the

enhancement of self worth of rural at-risk students through the use of the above described multicultural education model is a viable approach to meeting the needs of these same students.

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